

British army: Harm and abuse of child recruits

Background

Annually, the British army enlists approximately 2,000 recruits aged under 18,¹ mostly from deprived areas² and particular for infantry jobs.³ All recruits joining aged 16–17½ train at the Army Foundation College (AFC) in Harrogate where they face a high risk of harm, detailed below.⁴

The Army Foundation College

AFC recruits are enlisted soldiers subject to military law; they are not ‘cadets’. Nor are they ‘students’; the accredited education available to most recruits is basic, amounting to less than one day per week.⁵

In the most intense phase of training during the first six weeks,⁶ recruits may not leave the base without permission or use their mobiles more than once per day for a short call.⁷ They have no legal right to leave the army in this period.⁸ These restrictions make it difficult for recruits who suffer abuse to remove themselves from harm’s way or draw support from family or friends.

Abuse by staff

Between 2014 and 2020, the army recorded **62 formal complaints of violence** perpetrated against recruits by AFC staff, including assault and battery.⁹ **13 cases were proven**,¹⁰ of which **7 occurred since 2017**.¹¹ Some perpetrators continued to work at AFC following a finding of wrongdoing.¹²

Parents and former recruits have told CRIN of routine maltreatment at the base (their testimonies are available in full [online](#)).¹³ Charlotte Poad, a mother of a recruit who joined in 2016, writes:

‘My son... came home for a week or two, and... I realised all was not well at Harrogate. I overheard several conversations with his fellow recruits discussing “bathroom beatings” and “things going too far”... [W]e know that staff bullied and abused the young recruits, as well as encouraging fighting amongst peers... He is a completely different person since his time at Harrogate. He has attempted suicide and his mental health is permanently damaged.’

Alison Blackwell, a mother of a recruit who joined in the same year, writes:

‘[My son] told me he was hit, slapped, pushed, kicked and verbally abused by staff... He knew the training would be tough but this was abuse and the staff were power crazy... all staff knew what was going on but turned a blind eye. [He] started drinking heavily and was very withdrawn... he rang me to tell me he was handing in his letter to leave. He told me his request was ripped up in his face. He was only 17 years old [*with a legal right to leave the army*] and devastated at not being able to leave... My son died last year while still serving in the army.’

Joe Turton, who joined AFC in 2013 aged 16, writes:

‘If you ask for help, it’s “Piss off, you,” or “Shut the f*** up.” They [instructors] didn’t have to touch you to abuse you. [One] time, they announce a tattoo check. We’re ordered to strip to our underwear... then to pull up our pants so they can see everything but our genitals. The corporal walks down the line... and he tells me, as I’m almost naked, what he thinks of my body... He just makes fun of my body in front of the entire platoon. It breaks my heart that Ofsted has graded the place ‘outstanding’ for welfare... The truth is that the friends I met in that place were broken by it. It gave them PTSD, and me as well. Harrogate is dangerous but a recruit can’t just say that to a visitor - it’s too risky’

Sexual abuse

Girls aged under 18 in the armed forces are **twice** as likely as civilian girls of the same age to report a sexual assault or rape to the police.¹⁴ ¹⁵ In 2021, **one in eight** girls (13%) across the armed forces were victims of a sexual offence, according to MoD records of police investigations; girls were **ten times** as likely as adult female personnel to be victimised in this way.¹⁶

In 2021 alone, Service Police opened **nine investigations into sexual offences against 22 recruits** at AFC.¹⁷ At least half of the victims were girls.¹⁸ **Three suspects were members of staff**.¹⁹ In 2022, one instructor was reportedly charged with five counts of sexual abuse of 16-year-old girls at the base.²⁰

A survey of AFC female recruits in 2020 found that **48%** had experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination while training; **70%** said they would not report such behaviour.²¹

Welfare inspections

Ofsted inspects AFC under a limited regime that focuses on welfare and excludes education from its scope; the comprehensive framework used in civilian colleges does not apply.²² A civilian college with the same record of alleged and proven abuse by staff would not be allowed to remain open, but for a decade Ofsted has repeatedly awarded AFC an Outstanding grade for welfare.²³ This includes the period relating to the testimonies quoted above. Despite being made aware in 2020 of multiple detailed allegations of abuse on the army's own record, Ofsted's 2022 report does not mention them.²⁴

Since 2007, an Independent Advisory Panel has also reported annually on recruit welfare at AFC. Until 2021, none of its reports mentioned the army's record of alleged and proven maltreatment by staff.²⁵

Access to remedy

Few prosecutions for abuse at AFC are in the public domain. In 2018, the trial of 17 AFC instructors charged with multiple counts of abuse collapsed due to mishandling by the Service Police; among the allegations were that instructors had kicked and punched recruits, held their heads underwater, and pushed sheep dung into their mouths.²⁶ The subsequent internal review noted that the number of maltreated recruits had substantially exceeded those willing to make a complaint.²⁷

The military justice system has been widely criticised for long delays, failures of process and of outcome, and low confidence among victims.²⁸ ²⁹ The Government has rejected the recommendation of the 2018 Lyons Review that all serious offences including child abuse be referred to civilian police.³⁰

Health impact

The adolescent nervous system, particularly when compromised by childhood trauma,³¹ is highly reactive to conditions of sustained stress,³² which can aggravate mental health problems, including PTSD, as well as increase the risk of developing them later.³³ Bone density is also underdeveloped during adolescence, bringing additional risks of musculoskeletal injury under physical strain.³⁴

AFC describes the initial period of training as 'intense';³⁵ it includes the routine interruption of sleep and privacy, repeated physical exhaustion, and the use of humiliation to induce conformity. AFC's own research, published in 2022, found that its training led to an '**erosion of resilience**'³⁶ and left recruits with **difficulties managing emotions and reduced self-efficacy**, with no identifiable benefits to health or agency.³⁷ The impact on girls was particularly marked.³⁸ Physical injuries are also very common, particularly among girls, of whom **a third** (34%) suffered a musculoskeletal injury in 2021–22.³⁹

Recent research by Glasgow University investigated long-term mental health outcomes of child recruits across the armed forces. It found that recruits enlisted in the last approximately 25 years have had between **two and three times the odds of long-term PTSD** compared to same-age civilians from similar social backgrounds.⁴⁰ Research by King's College has also found that since 2003, veterans who had been recruited aged 16–17½ have had '**twice the odds of alcohol misuse and twice the odds of reporting episodes of lifetime self-harm**' as those recruited at older ages.⁴¹

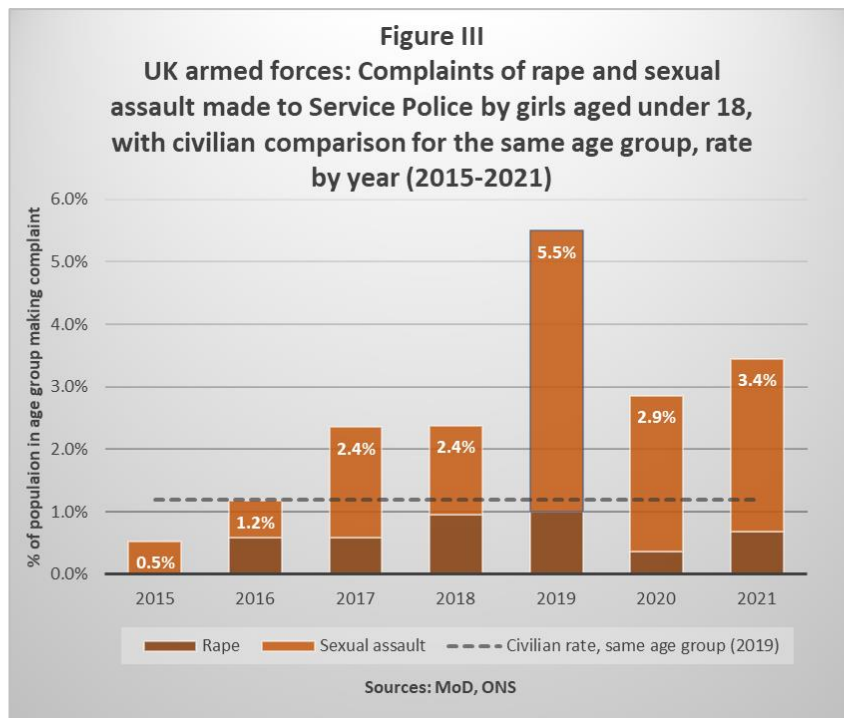
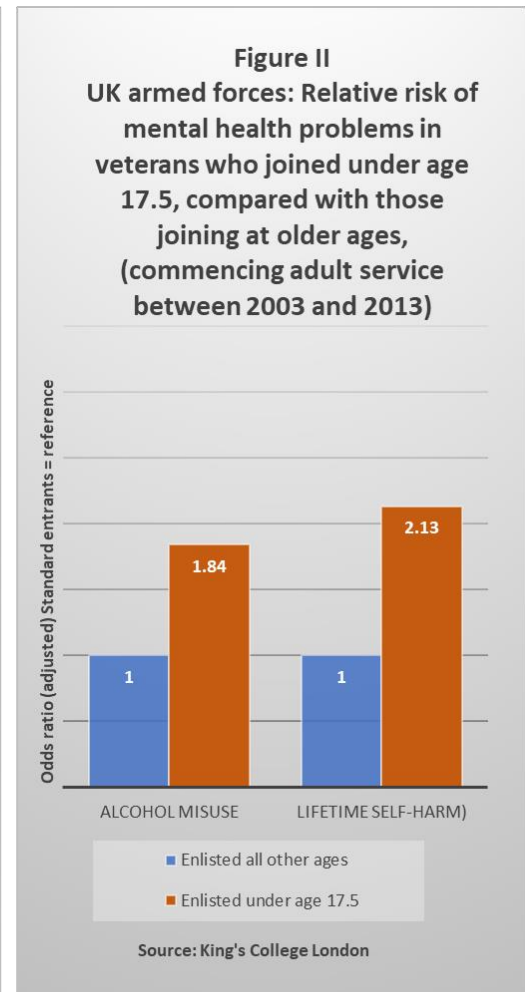
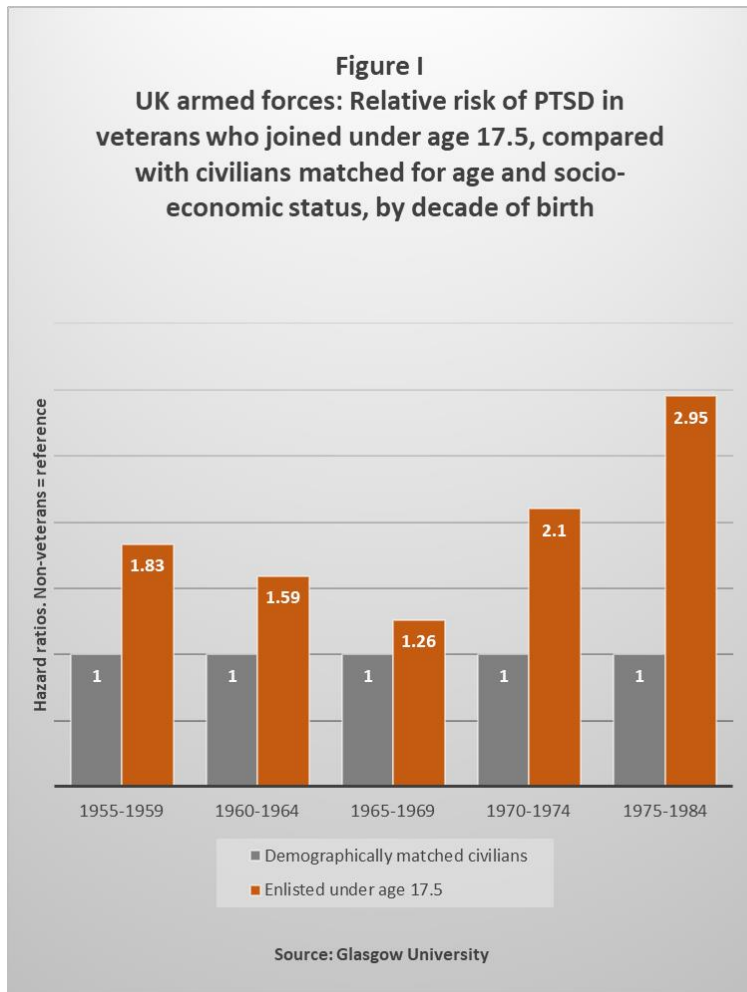
Over the last two decades, soldiers aged under 20 have been **31%** more likely than same-age civilians to end their lives.⁴² A study published in 2009 found that veterans under 20 were **between two and three times** as likely as their civilian peers to end their lives, and that those who had joined and left **at age 16** had the most elevated suicide risk of any veteran age group.⁴³

Conclusion

The government's legal duty to make the 'best interests' of children a 'primary consideration' is irreconcilable with the manifold risks of harm that follow military enlistment from age 16.⁴⁴ Raising the enlistment age to 18 would safeguard them from these harms while bringing many operational benefits to the armed forces. As we have shown elsewhere, the change would be feasible and cost-effective.⁴⁵

November 2022. Contact: Charlotte Cooper, charlotte@crin.org

Appendix⁴⁶



Notes and references

- ¹ In 2021-22, the army enlisted 6,780 recruits, of whom 2,030 (29.9%) were aged under 18. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics, 2022*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022>.
- ² The army recognises that 'the majority of the current JE [age 16–17½] cohort' have a 'tendency to live in poorer areas'. British army, 'Junior Entry Review – Final Report', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rq33o8t>, p. 2. Over a five-year period from 2013 to 2018 in England, the rate of recruitment of 16- and 17-year-olds into the British army was 57% higher in the most deprived fifth of constituencies than the least deprived fifth. C Cooper and D Gee, 'Youngest British army recruits come disproportionately from England's most deprived constituencies', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8osghz>.
- ³ According to the MoD, Junior Entry recruitment (aged 16-17.5 years) 'presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry (SE) shortfalls, particularly for the Infantry'. 'SE' refers to recruits aged 17.5 years and above. MoD, *Policy on recruiting Under-18s (U18)*, 2013, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, 12 February 2015, p. 2, <https://tinyurl.com/wzos8xw>. Between 2016-17 and 2020-21 inclusive, 38% of army recruits aged under 18 were enlisted for infantry roles, versus 30% of adult recruits. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics, 2021*, op cit.; Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/10665, 22 September 2021, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/infantry_enlistment#incoming-1881507.
- ⁴ A summary critique of other aspects of the policy of enlisting from age 16 is available elsewhere: Child Rights International Network (CRIN), *British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone*, 2021, <https://home.crin.org/s/CRIN-2021-briefing-armed-forces-recruitment-age.pdf>.
- ⁵ The three subjects available at the Army Foundation College are short, Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1, each graded at 45 guided learning hours, with an option to progress to Level 2 in each subject. Recruits who arrive without Level 2 qualifications in English, maths or ICT are enrolled on the relevant FS course(s) at Level 1, with the option of progressing to Level 2, which combined entail 80 hours' teaching time per subject (240 hours across all three subjects). Over the 49 week 'long course' at AFC, and allowing for the eight weeks of holiday, 240 hours is equivalent to 5.9 hours per week. See MoD, information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2020/00269/10/06, 5 February 2020.
- ⁶ British army, 'Army Foundation College Commanding Officer's Supervisory Care and Safeguarding Directive Risk Assessment', 2018, point 2.1. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2019/05572, 10 June 2019.
- ⁷ During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40–60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. *Ibid*.
- ⁸ Under-18s cannot leave the armed forces at will; they have no right to leave at all during the first six weeks, after which a 14-day notice-period applies, and after the first six months a three-month notice period applies. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- ⁹ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/13445, 30 November 2021, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged_abuse_at_army_foundation; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 109376, 4 November 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>.
- ¹⁰ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/PolSec/C/U/FOI2021/13445, 13 December 2021, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/804174/response/1936986/attach/3/20211213%20FOI2021%2013445.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/15645, 11 January 2022, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse_at_army_foundation_college.
- ¹² *Ibid*.
- ¹³ CRIN, 'Testimonies: abuse of children in armed forces training', <http://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/testimonies>.
- ¹⁴ Between 2015 and 2020 inclusive, the armed forces service police recorded 31 sexual offences against girls aged 16–17, representing an average rate of 2.5% in the age group. In 2020, for example, the service police recorded eight sexual offences against girls in the age group, who numbered 280 at the time (8 / 280 = 2.9%). Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/09403, 21 September 2021; MoD, 'UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 2021', 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>.
- ¹⁵ In 2019–20, police in England and Wales recorded 101,478 sexual offences (assault or rape) committed against women and girls, of which 7.3% (7,408) affected girls aged 16–17, representing a rate of 1.2% (7,408 offences / 618,095 population aged 16–17 in 2019). ONS, 'Dataset: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales (2019-20)', 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-sexual-offences-2019-20>; ONS, 'Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2020' (Figure 8, 2019, England and Wales only), 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-pop-2019>.
- ¹⁶ In 2021, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the Service Police, out of a total population of 290 girls serving in the armed forces; a rate of 12.8%. In the same year, 202 adult female personnel were victims of sexual offence cases, out of a population of 16,180; a rate of 1.2%. MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 154396, 26 April 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-14/154396>; MoD, *Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2021 Annual Statistics* [Worksheet 3], 31 March 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1064458/Murder_Manslaughter_Sexual_Offences_Supplementary_Tables.xls; MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2021* [Tables 1 and 3], 10 June 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1012586/Biannual_Diversity_Tables_Apr21.xlsx
- ¹⁷ MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 2317, 16 May 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-16/2317>.
- ¹⁸ In 2021, service police investigated sexual offences against 47 armed forces recruits under the age of 18, 37 of which were girls. Therefore, ten boys were victims, meaning at least twelve of the 22 victims based at the Army Foundation College were girls. MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 154397, 14 April 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-14/154397>.
- ¹⁹ MoD, Ministerial answer no. 2317, 16 May 2022, op cit.
- ²⁰ Marc Nicol and Richard Eden, 'Sex abuse claims hit Army college for teenage recruits as instructor is charged with more than 20 offences including five allegations of sexual assault against 16-year-old girls', *Mail on Sunday*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11346043/Sex-abuse-claims-hit-Army-college-teenage-recruits.html>.
- ²¹ Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers*, 2022, p. 5, <https://home.crin.org/s/Pj-ATHENA-Report.pdf>.

- ²² 'AFC Harrogate is not a civilian sixth-form or further education college, despite the inclusion of "college" in its title. It is an Army initial training establishment, and we inspect it as such.' Letter from Paul Joyce HMI, Deputy Director, Further Education and Skills to Child Rights International Network, 16 June 2022. In January 2019, the Minister of State for Education confirmed: 'Ofsted does not grade the Army Foundation College in Harrogate on the same basis as civilian colleges for the age group.' DfE, *Army Foundation College – Written question – 209858*, 17 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RmLu43>.
- ²³ The first Outstanding award was made in winter 2012–13, the most recent in 2021. See Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2013, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/376664/response/915747/attach/5/attachment.pdf>; and Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training-2020-to-2021>.
- ²⁴ Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2022, op cit.
- ²⁵ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2022/04543, 27 June 2022.
- ²⁶ S Morris, 'UK army investigators under fire as bullying trial collapses', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2019, theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/19/uk-army-investigators-under-fire-as-bullying-trial-collapses
- ²⁷ Mark Guinness, A Review of the Royal Military Police investigations into allegations of the ill treatment of Junior Soldiers at the Army Foundation College (Harrogate) (AFC(H)) 2014/15, 2018, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/880913/response/2093583/attach/5/20220802%20FOI08871.pdf>.
- ²⁸ See e.g. Defence Committee, *Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life: Second Report of Session 2021–22*, 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6959/documents/72771/default/>, pp. 45-69; MoD, *Report on Inappropriate Behaviours*, 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/817838/20190607_Defence_Report_Inappropriate_Behaviours_Final_ZKL.pdf, p. 13; Professor Sir Jon Murphy, *Service Justice System Policing Review (Part 1)*, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/service-justice-system-review>, pp. 42-44.
- ²⁹ In their annual reports to Parliament, the Service Complaints Ombudsperson has yet to appraise the system they oversee as 'efficient, effective and fair'. House of Commons Library, 'Research briefing: The Service Complaints system', 2021, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9153>.
- ³⁰ MoD, *Service Justice System Review*, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918867/SJS_Review_Part_1_Report_for_publication_accessible.pdf, p. 3. In 2021, a Lords amendment to the Armed Forces Bill, which would have required all serious offences to be referred to the civilian police, was voted down in the Commons.
- ³¹ M M Kishiyama, W T Boyce, A M Jimenez et al., 'Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2009, 21(6), pp. 1106–1115, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18752394/>; D Hackman & M J Farah, 'Socioeconomic status and the developing brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2009, 13(2), pp. 65–73, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19135405/>; K Campbell, 'The neurobiology of childhood trauma, from early physical pain onwards: as relevant as ever in today's fractured world', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2022a, 13(2), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008066.2022.2131969>.
- ³² Relative to adults, adolescents are temperamentally more anxious, more likely to experience depressed mood and emotional volatility, and more reactive to stressors, such that they react to stressors with greater anxiety and then remain anxious for longer. Under stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems, such as depression. The adolescent brain is also more sensitive to repeated or prolonged stress, under which its transition to full maturation is compromised, particularly the development of brain structures involved in the regulation of emotions. L P Spear, 'The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations', *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 417–463, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10817843/>; T Paus, M Keshavan, & J Giedd, 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?', *Nat Rev Neurosci*, 2008, 9, pp. 947–957, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2513>; K D Baker, M L Den, B M Graham, & R Richardson, 'A window of vulnerability: impaired fear extinction in adolescence', *Neurobiol Learn Mem*, 2014, 113, pp. 90–100, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24513634/>; K Campbell, 'Childhood trauma: a major risk factor in the military recruitment of young people', *BMJ Military Health*, 2022b, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/jramc/early/2022/05/31/bmjilitary-2022-002149.full.pdf>.
- ³³ K Campbell, 'The neurobiology of childhood trauma...', 2022a, op cit.
- ³⁴ C Milgrom C, A Finestone, N Shlamkovitch, et al., 'Youth is a risk factor for stress fracture. A study of 783 infantry recruits', *J Bone Joint Surg Br*, 1994, 76(1), pp. 20–22, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8300674/>.
- ³⁵ British army, 2018, op cit.
- ³⁶ Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena* report, op cit., p. 28.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 30–34.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 58.
- ⁴⁰ B P Bergman, D F Mackay, N T Fear, & J P Pell, 'Age at entry to UK military service and long-term mental health', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/08/bmjilitary-2021-001786>.
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- ⁴² Figures apply to the 20-year period between 2002 and 2021. The suicide rate among soldiers aged under 20 has been increasing since 2007. See additional table 4 in MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 2021', 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-suicides-2021> [spreadsheet].
- ⁴³ N Kapur, D While, N Blatchley, et al., 'Suicide after leaving the UK armed forces — A cohort study', *PLOS Medicine*, 2009, 6(3), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000026>.
- ⁴⁴ Article 3 and Article 19, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- ⁴⁵ C Cooper & D Gee, 'Has the time come for an all-adult army?', *RUSI Commentary*, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/has-time-come-all-adult-army>.
- ⁴⁶ Sources for figures: Figure I: Bergman et al., 2021, op cit.; Figure II: Jones et al, 2021, op cit.; Figure III: Calculated from MoD, Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. 2021/09403, 21 September 2021., https://home.crin.org/s/20210921_Response_FOI2021_09403.pdf; MoD, Biannual diversity statistics, 2021, op cit. (Table 3); and Office for National Statistics, 'Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales', 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/sexualoffencesprevalenceandvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales> (Tables 13, 20).